

School is only part of an education for indigenous children

Jude Davies May 23, 2009

HERE we go again, thinking maybe we should take the children away — for their own good, so they can have a "proper" education and perhaps even fit nicely into mainstream Australian society.

This, despite a clear statement from the Laynhapuy Homelands Association, which represents 19 communities in north-eastern Arnhem Land: "(We) ... do not wish to be assimilated or mainstreamed." They go on to say that they "strongly value their culture and law and links to country".

It was this valuing and the need to resist being mainstreamed that led to the homelands movement in the 1970s. Aboriginal people moved in small groups — with 35 or so members — to their traditional country, away from the shiny influence of big settlements such as Maningrida and Gunbalanya. It is such small group structures that have worked so well for these people for longer than anyone can remember.

Now the Northern Territory's Chief Minister's Department is suggesting in a report that children from these remote homelands in Arnhem Land should be taken by bus to large regional schools. Children aged five to 12 will have to endure a daily bus ride of at least 70 kilometres one way, over corrugated bush tracks, to get to school. Once at school, there is no denying they will learn important skills, but in a long primary school day, there are also many "soft" subjects, such as singing, sport, art, craft.

Why would these children need to learn such activities in a distant school when art, singing, dancing and hunting are central to their culture and daily way of life?

From 1975 to 1978, I was the teacher based in Maningrida. The elders realised their children would need to speak English well, read, write and do sums. They invited me, and the federal government supplied funding.

I stayed in the communities for weeks at a time, working to incorporate morning school into the rhythm of life. I learnt the language and hunted for my food with the women each day.

Each morning, soon after daybreak, children, mothers, babies and dogs would assemble in the open-sided bark school. One of the women and I would teach until it became too hot. Then we would all swim and go hunting.

Our syllabus was very simple, I taught the three R's. These were the skills from the mainstream community that the children would need. This is what the old people asked me to teach. Other skills were taught by family members.

First there were three communities with such schools, then more requested this unobtrusive method of education.

With up to nine communities wanting such schooling, I developed a "correspondence" system. With the help of another white teacher, I made up booklets and we trained women in the homeland settlements how to teach using the booklets.

It seemed such a good idea, but it didn't work. Without me in the community, school didn't happen. I had to realise that the skills we teach in school are mainstream

business. Even though they are essential keys to today's broad Australian culture, they are foreign and not even necessary in a remote homeland.

It was clear that the most effective schooling system was one incorporated into the daily rhythm of life and taught by teachers who understood they offered one part of a bigger system of education being supplied by community and family.

Last year, I visited the small community where I had spent much of my time in the 1970s. The baby I used to carry while hunting was a feisty mother of two.

Where there had been bark shelters there were now solid wooden houses. There was also a beautiful schoolhouse with books and solar-powered lighting. It was locked. "No school?" I asked. "When the teacher comes from Maningrida," was the reply. I was told the teacher visited for a couple of days every few weeks.

So a system is already in place that brings a teacher to remote communities. It needs only minor changes to be very effective. Rather than beginning again with a doomed school bus system and letting beautiful school buildings lie neglected, the Government should support teachers who visit remote communities for several weeks at a time.

The visits could be arranged through negotiation with the communities, ensuring full support for school. This way the teacher and school become part of daily life and the skills taught become part of the complex education process in remote homeland settlements.

Jude Davies is a Melbourne writer. This article appeared in The Age on 22 May 2009
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